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Madagascar shrimp producer eyes China

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High-end Madagascar shrimp will grace China's tables beginning next month, when the first containers arrive from the African island nation. French-owned UNIMA Group plans to import 200 tons into Greater China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan) this year, with plans for an additional 500 to 800 tons in 2013, according to Stephane Jackiw, head of commercial and retail sales at UNIMA.

Jackiw told SeafoodSource that demand for quality shrimp makes the time right for UNIMA to crack the Chinese market. He said the firm will target three mainland cities: Beijing, Dalian and Shanghai. UNIMA has been working through local distributors — he declined to name them — to communicate the firm's unique selling points.

"Eco-friendly models created by UNIMA protect natural environments, thus promoting the well-being and quality of animals," said Jackiw. "As the only company to have vertically integrated its entire supply chain, UNIMA can fully guarantee to its customers the quality, traceability, safety and the service it provides. I think that it is really important to explain to the Asian consumer how we can produce the best shrimp of the world with the respect of Madagascar environment and people."

UNIMA isn't the only link between Madagascar and Chinese seafood markets. China National Fisheries Corp. in 2010 took over a group of Madagascar shrimp producing-processing firms from Japan-based Maruha Group — Somapeche, Somaqua and Sopeno.

UNIMA Group produces 6,000 tons of shrimp and claims to account for three-quarters of Madagascar's farmed shrimp production. The island exports about 8,000 tons of shrimp a year, according to the nation's fisheries ministry. The Indian Ocean island nation, situated off the east coast of Africa, relies on agriculture to generate 29 percent of output in its USD 8.6 billion economy, according to the African Development Bank.

However, rising fuel prices — which account for 40 percent of average input costs — have cut margins for the capture segment of the island's fishing industry. The Economic Observatory of the Shrimp Industry, based in Antananarivo, the capital, said a rise of more than 30 percent in fuel prices in 2011, combined with falling international shrimp prices, hurt business.

China's shrimp imports are on the rise. According to USDA figures from January to October 2011, China imported USD 662 million worth of the crustacean, compared to USD 513 million in all of 2010. The leading source of shrimp imports were Canada (28,120 tons), Thailand (6,908 tons) and Burma (7,042 tons), which displaced Greenland for the third spot in January-October 2011 figures.

China's domestic shrimp, prawn and crab output rose from 2.9 million tons in 2009 to 3.1 million tons in 2010, according to statistics published by the agricultural ministry in Beijing (2011 figures were unavailable).

Jackiw said UNIMA will exhibit at both the Asian Seafood Exposition in Hong Kong in September and the China Fisheries & Seafood Expo in Dalian in November.

"I think that there are some beautiful opportunities for us to develop our sustainable shrimp in the Asian Market and particularly China," said Jackiw, "because the Asian customer understands our quality and the differentiation of shrimp."

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